

Setting New Teachers Up for Failure... or Success

Schools often overwhelm new teachers by expecting them to juggle all the responsibilities and duties that veteran teachers do. Instead, we need to give new teachers time to grow.

Lisa Renard

At the end of his first year of teaching, Frank Luciano began looking for another profession. Although he had started the year with fresh hopes and optimistic ideas, the reality of his experience left him exhausted, disillusioned, and just plain fed up.

Frank and another first-year teacher who had been trained in special education were assigned to team teach three inclusive earth science classes. Neither he nor his partner had ever had their own classrooms before; neither had been trained for more than an hour in how to teach as a team. Frank had taken only a few special education courses, and his partner knew little about science content. They both needed to learn how to manage students, keep classroom records, differentiate curriculum, and deal with parents' concerns. With no clear expertise of their own to draw on, they often clashed over decision making and splitting the workload.

In addition to the challenges of being paired with another classroom novice, Frank found that his school expected him to sit on four different committees: a subcommittee on professional development for the school improvement plan; a textbook selection committee for the science department; a committee tasked with mapping the 9th grade science curriculum for the following year; and the school's Web site design committee. As part of an inclusion team,

Frank also found himself required to participate in many special education meetings about individual students, both during his teaching day and after school. All of this was piled on top of the department and faculty meetings and professional development activities that all teachers had to attend.

The seasoned veterans of the classroom will tell you horror stories about how overwhelming and awful their first years were.

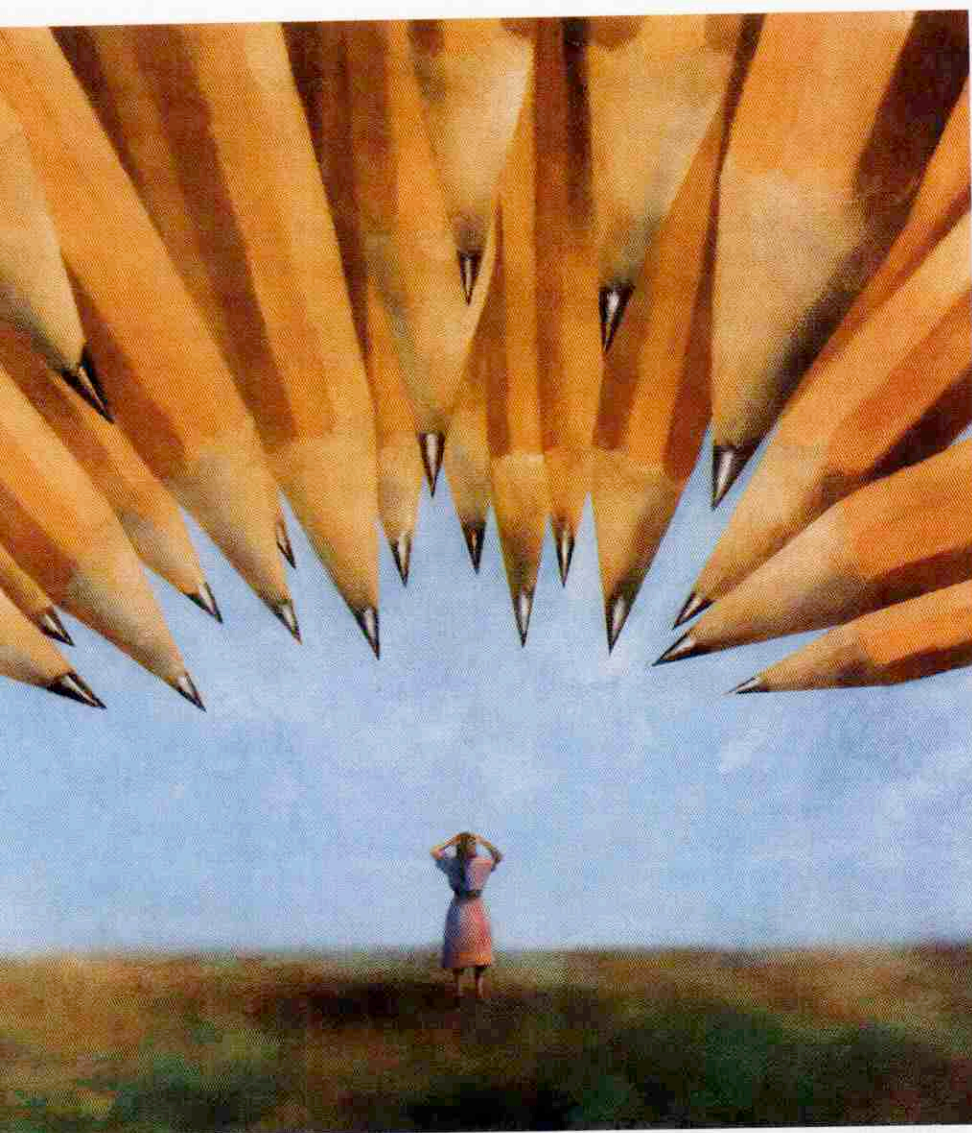
When Frank was hired, his principal made it clear that he expected all teachers to advise one of the school's many extracurricular activities or sports teams. Frank chose to take charge of the school's academic team. He soon found himself ordering team shirts, holding parent meetings, staging team practices every week, and traveling in the evenings to different schools for meets. The extracurricular activity began to eat into his teaching day as academic team members stopped by for help; phone calls from parents and other team advisors flooded in; and he organized, conducted, and documented fund-

raising activities to support the team's activities. Because he had never performed any of these duties before, he was learning, making mistakes, and taking more time to do them than did many of his experienced colleagues with the same sorts of duties.

In addition to the committees and extracurricular assignments, Frank's school assigned him to school duty during one of his two daily nonteaching periods. As a front-door monitor, he spent one period every day greeting visitors, asking them to sign in, and handing out visitor name badges. He tried to use the time to get some planning done or grade papers, but he found that constant interruptions seriously undermined his progress.

As if all of these time-consuming duties weren't enough, Frank was dismayed to find that his one free planning period was not the same as that of his assigned mentor. If he wanted to meet with her to ask questions, reflect on the day, or just vent, he had to schedule time before or after school. They didn't even share the same lunch period. Frank only saw his mentor in the committee or department meetings, when time was fleeting.

By winter break, Frank felt alone, isolated, and overwhelmed. He couldn't keep up with classroom demands, found his personal life falling apart because he was spending so much time on work, and eventually decided that



expertise and within the same time constraints. We hold new teachers accountable for skills that they don't yet have and that they can only gain through experience (Huberman, 1989).

We know, as rational human beings and former novices ourselves, that new teachers take more time to do what we may consider the routine activities of teaching. They spend more hours planning units and lessons, grading papers, and reflecting on their successes and failures in the classroom. It takes them longer to produce effective handouts and tests, longer to accumulate activities and resources for use in instruction, and longer to design and implement effective class records and management systems that experienced teachers whip out in no time. New teachers often find themselves overwhelmed with work, both at school and at home. Yet we continue to ask them to do all of the "extras" that veterans do.

As Allen (2000) comments in a report for the Education Commission of the States, "new teachers are not finished products." Expecting them to perform all of the duties that we expect of seasoned professionals is unrealistic. We should not be surprised that new teachers often end up feeling "demoralized and dispirited, anxious about their efficacy and their capacity to cope" (Scott, 1995, p. 96).

Teaching remains "the profession that eats its young" (Halford, 1998). The seasoned veterans of the classroom will tell you horror stories about how overwhelming and awful their first years were. They will tell you about getting the worst teaching assignments, the worst students, and the worst classrooms and supplies. They will tell you about teaching from a cart with no classrooms of their own; being given the unwanted duties; and being expected to cheerfully put up with the situation because they were the lowest on the totem pole.

Although we may not want to acknowledge it, schools have a pecking order. Experienced teachers often believe that they have paid their dues and that new teachers must do the same.

teaching was an impossible and unrewarding job.

Learning to Teach on the Run

According to surveys of research literature, the major concerns of most new teachers include classroom management, student motivation, differentiation for individual student needs, assessment and evaluation of learning, and dealing effectively with parents (Britton, Paine, & Raizen, 1999; Kurtz, 1983; Veenman, 1984). Preservice teachers don't learn these skills by reading a book in a methodology class. They hone these teaching skills by trial and error, by being in the thick of it, by reflecting on successes and analyzing failures. In short,

the things that new teachers find most problematic are the things that come with time. In addition, new teachers must devote extra time to become experts in their subject areas or grade levels. Often, they are learning material just a step ahead of their students.

Current rhetoric about how to help and retain new teachers includes much information on the topics of induction and mentoring programs. But we rarely see solutions to the crux of the problem with our profession: We expect brand-new, just-out-of-the-wrapper teachers to assume the same responsibilities and duties as our most seasoned professionals, and we expect them to carry out those duties with the same level of

© Michael Gibbs

They may view surviving the first few years of teaching as a badge of honor.

We need to do away with this kind of thinking if we want to improve teacher quality and retention. As elementary school principal Georgiann McKenna (2001) says, we need school leaders with radical vision and the zeal to implement practices that will turn the situation around. We can help new teachers succeed by lightening their load to help them concentrate on their classroom teaching performance. In effect, we must buy them the time they need to become the teachers we want them to be.

Nurturing New Teachers

School and district administrators can start to improve teacher retention by making the following commitments as part of a comprehensive induction and mentoring program.

- Do not pair new classroom teachers in inclusion teams (especially not with another new teacher). Give them time in their own classrooms before asking them to team teach.
- Do not require new teachers to advise or coach extracurricular activities until they have at least two or three years of experience in the classroom.
- Do not assign new teachers to a school duty period; instead, hold them accountable for using that time toward planning instruction and becoming more proficient in their subject areas.
- Do not place new teachers on school or department committees until they have at least two or three years of classroom experience.
- Avoid assigning new teachers to the most challenging grade levels or students.
- Refrain from assigning new teachers to classrooms with multiple grade levels.
- Refrain from assigning new teachers to more than two course preparations.
- Avoid giving new teachers schedules that require them to change classrooms repeatedly during the day or to work primarily from a cart.
- Decrease the number of profes-

Experienced teachers often believe that they have paid their dues and that new teachers must do the same.

sional development activities expected of new teachers. Hold them accountable only for those activities designed to boost classroom effectiveness.

■ Make certain that new teachers and their mentors have the same planning period, and occasionally provide substitute teachers so that novices can either meet with their mentors for extended periods or observe the mentors' classrooms.

■ Keep first-year teachers in the same courses or grade levels for two or three years; allow them to become seasoned before changing their teaching assignment.

On the flip side, of course, we must hold new teachers accountable for using their freed-up time toward becoming effective classroom teachers. Adjusting working conditions for new teachers does not mean just letting them off the hook. This adjustment must be part of a targeted, purposeful process of helping them focus and excel until they no longer need such accommodations. We provide such support for students all the time and call it scaffolding.

This accountability should involve frequent observations by colleagues, trained mentors, department heads, or supervising administrators who can provide the new teacher with specific feedback. The idea is to gradually introduce new teachers to their full set of duties, with mentor and supervisor support, so that they can do them well without becoming overwhelmed. As they demonstrate growing proficiency and confidence, they can assume additional duties. In the end, new teachers ought to emerge from their first few years of teaching feeling empowered, supported, and capable in all roles of the classroom teacher.

If we are serious about retaining new teachers past their crucial first three

years and about helping them to become effective classroom leaders, then we have to look at what we ask of new teachers and make a commitment to adjust their teaching loads and work schedules to set them up for success rather than failure. We must commit ourselves to becoming the profession that nurtures its young. ■

References

- Allen, M. (2000). New imperatives for teacher preparation. *Teacher Preparation and Induction*, 2(3). Available: www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/22/38/2238.htm
- Britton, E., Paine, L., & Raizen, S. (1999). *Middle grades mathematics and science teachers' induction in selected countries: Preliminary findings*. Washington, DC: National Center for Improving Science Education, WestEd.
- Halford, J. (1998). Easing the way for new teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 55(5), 33-36.
- Huberman, M. (1989). The professional life cycle of teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 91(1), 31-57.
- Kurtz, W. H. (1983). Identifying their needs: How the principal can help beginning teachers. *NASSP Bulletin*, 67(459), 42-45.
- McKenna, G. (2001, July/August). It starts and ends with boards: Retaining new teachers. *Illinois School Board Journal*. Available: www.iasb.com/files/j1070802.htm
- Scott, L. D. (1995). Successful beginning teachers: A developmental model of support and assessment. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 22(4), 93-105.
- Veenman, S. (1984). Perceived problems of beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 143-178.

Copyright © 2003 Lisa Renard.

Lisa Renard (540-658-6115; renard@starpower.net) teaches language arts and creative writing at Colonial Forge High School in Stafford, Virginia, and works with the Peak Learning Systems team in Evergreen, Colorado; www.peaklearn.com.

